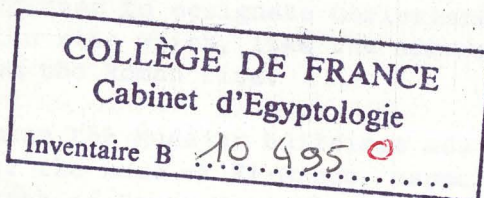


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Dr. John Alden Williams, who has been awarded the Center's Islamic fellowship for study in Egypt during the coming season, has not been forgetful of the Center during the summer, which he has spent in visiting Islamic monuments in Spain and North Africa. The present Newsletter consists of extracts from his letters. While it contains nothing directly concerned with Egypt, it should prove of value to members of the Center who are interested in the art and culture of Islam...

Granada, August 1, 1958

"Once in the Central Plateau, one realizes that Spain is not quite Europe. In some arid stretches, one can almost fancy himself in the steppe-deserts of Syria, Iraq, or Egypt, overgrown by the same thorny scrub, grazed on by flocks of goats shepherded by lean, brown herdsmen with aquiline features. And yet the towns, villages, and churches, as well as the customs of the people, proclaim very definitely that Spain is a province of western Christian civilization -- proclaim it with an intensity and determination that is almost Arab.

"It is this intensity, no doubt, that is responsible for the disappearance or mutilation of so many of Spain's Arab monuments. There is still plenty, however, for the student of Islamic art to see and admire. He will find beautiful Islamic objects in the Museum at Madrid and fine monuments still standing, though much of what the guide books call 'Moorish' turns out, on closer inspection, only to be built on Moorish foundations.

"I have visited Toledo, Cordoba, Seville, and Granada. In Toledo, the most Spanish of all cities, brooding on rocky crags above the Tagus, there survives the fine little mosque of Bib al-Mardum, from 980 A. D., with its nine ribbed domes, recalling the much larger domes of Cordoba. Though its conversion into a Christian chapel has resulted in changes in the more florid Mudéjar style, it still retains something of its primitive character. The tiny domed chapel in the convent of Santa Fé is of about the same period, though much less noteworthy. The city walls still contain many patches of Moorish masonry, and several of the gates have retained some of their Arab characteristics. But one of the most extraordinary features of Toledo is a number of Mudéjar constructions which have, in their early phases, all the characteristics of Arab art (and were indeed often built by Moorish architects for Christians or Jews) and in their later phases blend Islamic elements with Gothic influences from Northern Europe. From roughly the time of the reconquest of the city in 1085, under Alonzo IV, until the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, when Spain was caught up in the excitement of the Renaissance, this truly national Spanish style, compounded of Moorish and Christian elements, flourished in Spain. Here, it might be noted, parenthetically, that even today a minority



Toledans still cling to the ancient Mozarab rite (from Must'arab, "arabicised," a word used to designate Christians who became Arab in everything but religion), a Latin rite which, like the Ambrosian rite of Milan, differs in many particulars from the Roman rite.

"Among the Mudéjar buildings are two former synagogues in the old Jewish quarter near the home of El-Greco, especially to be noted for their stucco work -- the church of Santa Maria la Blanca, built around 1200, and El-Transito, dating from about 1260. The latter, particularly, shows a mingling of Gothic and Moorish decorative elements. It is interesting to find in it eulogies of Pedro II ('the Cruel') of Castile, who was a protector of the Jews.

"Cordoba, seat of the Ummayyad or (Caliphate, built near the important Roman bridge spanning the Guadalquivir, still conserves part of its Arab walls, constructed, like those of Granada, of pisé, a rammed earth of mortar-like hardness and durability, and its streets and patioed houses recall the days when it was one of the brightest lights of civilization in Europe, with students coming from across the Pyrenees to study in its mosque. In spite of later mutilations, that mosque, the largest in the world, with its forest of pillars and double storeys of arches, still remains one of the great monuments of Islamic art. Begun in 786 under 'Abd-al-Rahman I, founder of the Spanish Ummayyad Dynasty. It was repeatedly enlarged and redecorated by his descendents until late in the 10th century.

"The most splendid additions are those of El-Hakam II, who added the present mihrab area, splendid with alabaster, stucco-work, and gleaming mosaics of floral motifs executed by Byzantine craftsmen from Constantinople in 965. The minaret at the entrance, forming the core of the bell-tower (for the mosque is now the Christian cathedral), was added by Abd-al-Rahman III, the builder of Madinat-al-Zahra'.

"The central area of the mosque has suffered a terrible mutilation at the hands of 16th century architects, who constructed there a main chapel in flamboyant Renaissance-Baroque style, at complete variance with the remainder of the building. One wishes devoutly that the Mudéjar style might have survived a little longer, for the Mudéjar chapel of San Fernando, built by Henry of Trastamara, the brother of Pedro I, in 1369, is not only handsome but in fact is an ornament to the earlier structure.

"The Versailles of Cordoba, Madinat-al-Zahra', begun in 936 by 'Ab-dal-Rahman III, is only a field of ruins, needing care and thought to reconstruct in imagination its former splendor. It was built in three rising stages on a mountain slope overlooking the valley of the Guadalquivir (whose name itself is Arabic -- al-Wadi al-Kabir, 'the Great Valley') and seems to have possessed the same general tripartite structure as the Alcazar of Seville and the Alhambra of Granada -- the Mashwar, or diwan, for hearing cases and dispensing justice, the 'Hall of Ambassadors', or throne-room, for important functions, and the Harim, the apartments of the royal family. Scattered about the site are great numbers of stucco and stone fragments, and from these it has been possible to reconstruct most of the Hall of Ambassadors. The work is still unfinished, but it is being carried on with great skill and patience by a crew of workmen under the direction of an archaeologist. Nearly all the columns must be made anew, for of the 4,313 columns originally employed in the palace, almost all were long ago carried away to be reused in other buildings. The Hall, with its horseshoe arcades, looks very much like a mosque. But mosques, of course, were the first throne-rooms of Islam.

"In Seville, little survives from the Arab period but the great belfry, the lower portion of which was the minaret, and some arcades of the courtyard of the mosque. The Alcazar, however, though in its present form Mudéjar, dating from the reign of Peter the Cruel, is an almost perfect example of an Arab palace, with its horseshoe arches and rich stucco- and tile-work.

"It is Granada, when all is told, that most completely preserves its Arab character. One hesitates to add to all that has been written about the Alhambra, but, though I had read most of it, I was completely unprepared for the reality. The building is unforgettable, not alone for its natural setting, but for its splendor. I can not think that anywhere else so much opulence and magnificence have been so knowingly combined with charm and intimacy. Profaned as it is by noisy tourists accompanied by crying children, gypsy guides, cameras and even portable radios, it does not fail to impress the visitor as one of the great monuments of Islamic architecture.

Marrakesh, August 19

"Morocco, with its varied landscape, is the most beautiful Arab country I have visited. There is endless variety -- mountains and forests, fertile plains and seashores, arid steppes and green oases. Speaking generally, the ratio of sown or sowable land is very high; there is little true desert.

"As for the people, they form a most interesting mosaic of tribes and cultures, and few countries can show such fine and variegated costumes. Although in most cities men are beginning to discard their traditional jallabas and burnooses for bluejeans and bright sport shirts, the women, except for a few evoluées from aristocratic or bureaucratic families, are still veiled to the eyes. Townsmen wear their own dignified robes and headgears, but the Berbers from the mountains, the steppes, and the villages all dress differently, according to the region from which they come. A surprising traditional headgear worn by villagers, men and women alike (for Berber women are rarely veiled), is a wide-brimmed straw hat, which would be considered exotic, if not impious, in the Eastern Arab world.

"A startling thing about Morocco is the gulf between the ville and the medina, the foreign and the native city. Casablanca, Tangier, and Rabat all are astonishing European cities, provided with every modern comfort, beautiful shops, and excellent restaurants. Every important town has a similar European quarter, solidly built -- it is clear that the French expected to stay in Morocco. But in the medinas, the native cities, life goes on with a purity of tradition almost unknown in the East. For the Orientalist, the medinas are great social museums. The well-built French highways skirt them, but, though the presence française has altered the face of the country, it has hardly changed the way of life of the people. Almost all Moroccans speak some French; some of them think in French, but that fact has not changed their thoughts nor their views on life.

"Immediately upon my arrival, I attempted to obtain permission to visit and study some of the religious monuments. I came well recommended and was able to discuss the matter with two cabinet ministers. They were remarkably intelligent, competent young men in their early thirties and willing, even eager, to help me. They sent me, with letters of recommendation, to a high religious dignitary, who told me, very courteously, that what I wanted was quite impossible; the Ulema (a council of theologians), who must give such permission as I wished, invariably refuse it. As a partial consolation, I have been allowed to visit a few of the madrasahs, religious schools,

which are vacant in the summer and not as sacrosanct as mosques; none of them, however, dates from earlier than the fourteenth century. But even if I had had the backing of the King, I am sure that the mosques would still have been inaccessible to me.

"Morocco is a treasure-house of the finest Islamic art. Unlike most of the rest of the Arab world, however, it has refused access by Western scholars to its important monuments. Indeed, the gulf between East and West in other respects often seems very wide indeed. A European friend has told me of giving a generous alms to a beggar, who, not realizing that the donor knew Arabic, instead of the usual benediction intoned: 'God's curse on this Nazarene, who gives me so little from his riches!' I myself was asked by a young man, whom I had requested to show me about the medina of Rabât after dark (a time when it seemed best to have a guide), 'Aren't you afraid to be seen with a Moroccan? What will your European friends say?' This, in the capital of independent Morocco!

"In short, socially, Morocco is a country in which race-relations -- that is, the experiment of two different human groups in living together -- have failed. And however grateful one may be for the opportunity to see old Islamic urban life unspoiled, he cannot help but find the implications very disturbing.

"Europeans are still much in evidence; as many as 70% of the employees in some government departments are still Frenchmen, supervised at the top by a tiny cadre of highly trained young Moroccans, of whom the two young ministers I have mentioned are an example. There are simply no replacements for the French, and the government is anxious to retain them until replacements can be trained. Much, or most, official business is transacted in the French language. The foreign officials work competently in French all day and return to their comfortable villas to discuss, in French, the good old days or to make plans for a future job in France or the colonies. The official government holiday is still Sunday, although Moslem employees usually stay away from work on Friday, as well.

"The ordinary dialect of the country is as far from classical Arabic as any I have ever encountered; it is almost impossible for me to communicate with an uneducated man for any but the most basic purposes. However, by refusing to speak French, I have been given a most extraordinary welcome by the Moroccans. With my broad Egyptian accent, I am usually taken for a Cairene, who (as everybody knows from the Egyptian movies) is almost indistinguishable from a European anyway. On the strength of my accent, I have had taxi drivers cut their fares in half! Even when I explain that I am an American living in Cairo, the enthusiasm for everything Egyptian is so great that I am still addressed as 'brother,' a title here reserved for Muslims, and given many other courtesies."

Fes, August 26, 1958

"It is significant that in this city Europeans are referred to as 'Nazarenes' and only as a mark of courtesy or education as 'Europeans.' Moroccans are designated as 'Muslim' and Islam is frequently called 'the Arab religion.' I recall the shock and disbelief of one Moroccan, when I asked him which of the Arab religions he referred to and told him that nearly 10% of the Arabs of Egypt and the Fertile Crescent were Christians.

"Before describing my experiences in Fes, I should like to give a brief account of some of the monuments I have seen. Though it is impossible to visit mosques and none of the madrasahs is earlier than the 14th century, certain early structures are accessible. Rabat boasts a number of notable structures, including its 12th century walls and gasbah. Of particular interest are the ruins of the great mosque of Hasan, built around 1195. At one time, this structure (which was never really finished) was one of the greatest mosques of Islam. Like most Arab fortifications in Spain and Morocco, it is constructed of pisé, or rammed earth. It had a forest of thick columns, imposing, but with little claim to artistic merit. The ground plan is most unusual, with three courtyards, one in front and two smaller ones at the side of the main sanctuary. But by far the most impressive part of the mosque is the minaret, also unfinished, which was built in 1195, at about the same time and perhaps by the same architect as those of the Giralda of Seville and the Kutubiya Of Marrakesh. Its proportions are imposing -- a base 16 1/5 meters square and a height of 44 meters. The masonry is fine and the decoration large, simple, and beautiful. These three minarets are among the finest and most typical works left by the Almohade dynasty, puritanical Berbers from the High Atlas, who invaded Andalusia to save it from the infidel, stayed to reform its morals, and finally succumbed to its civilization, succeeded to the Caliphate, and established an empire on Andalusian models from Castile to Tunis.

"Also of great artistic interest at Rabat are the tombs of Shella, just outside the Almohade walls, where the monarchs of the Merinid dynasty were buried. It is a very ancient site, once a Roman frontier town and before that a Phoenician settlement, situated on the Bou Regreg river, above its mouth on the Atlantic. It was chosen as a royal necropolis in the 13th century by the successors of the Almohades, a tribe of Saharan nomads who aided the Almohades in their wars and then profited by their decadence to seize much of their empire, that is, much of what is now Morocco.

"Like all Merinid art, the necropolis, consisting of several small ruined mosques and zawias, has great elegance. The buildings make rich and advantageous use of polychrome tiles, fine capitals, handsome pools and basins. To this day, the site is regarded as holy and mysterious by the people, who come in large numbers to perform peculiar folk-rites, to honor their saints, or to propitiate the jinn, who make the necropolis their chosen dwelling.

"It was under the Merinids that madrasahs, theological schools in imitation of the Eastern institutions, began to be built in Morocco. A fine example of the madrasah (or medersa, as it is called in Morocco) is that of Salé, on the opposite side of the Bou Regreg from Rabat and Shella. It is small and very richly ornamented, with only a single rectangular patio (for in the West there was only a single orthodox school, that of Malik, so that it was never necessary to make provision for the other three orthodox Sunni rites), which has an upper story containing students' rooms supported on thick pillars encrusted with bright ceramic squares; at one end is an elegant oratory with a fine stucco mihrab and a good ceiling of wood, and the upper story also is decorated with fine stucco and excellently carved wood. The gate to the Mellah, or Ghetto, of Salé, which dates from the earliest years of the Merinid dynasty, is of a very different style from this later, elegant architecture and is rather similar to the hardy, monumental work of the Almohade period.

"The minaret of the Kutubiyah mosque at Marrakesh is the best preserved of the three great Almohade minarets. It is more slender than that of Hasan, being only 12 1/2

meters square at the base, but taller, reaching the impressive height of 67 meters. Like the minarets of Hasan and Giralda it is ascended by interior ramps. Also preserved from the Almohade period at Marrakesh is the Bab Aganaw, which afforded access to the palace quarter -- an imperial city still preserved in its essentials and occupied by a residence of the reigning monarch. The old palace has disappeared, but its enormous courtyards, or meshwars, remain, as well as the great Moorish pleasure garden, which covers many square kilometers.

"The history of Morocco is the expansion of orthodox, oriental, Arabic-Islamic civilization at the expense of the native Berber cultures. The process of Arabicization is still going on and at a much more accelerated rate. The orthodox ideal is centered in the city of Fes, one of the most beautiful, traditional, and orthodox Islamic cities in existence. Marrakesh, on the other hand, is African and Saharan -- a sprawling red city of pisé, situated in an oasis at the foot of the High Atlas and on the edge of the pre-Sahara. Here is where the tribes of the desert and the tribes of the mountain meet to relax and market their products. There is, at any time, a large population of transients. The heart of the city can be felt in the lively Jema' al-Fana' (in the local dialect, 'The Meeting-Place of the Dead'), a huge square, where troupes of charlatans, story-tellers, dancing-boys, musicians, Koran-readers, magicians, and acrobats amuse the crowds, and from whence, at any time, the beating of drums can be heard. It is a colorful place, fully expressing the great caravan city.

"Many Moroccans consider Marrakesh only half-civilized. Let us not underestimate the civilized half, however, for Marrakesh has given more than its name to the country. It is an imperial city and, with its important medersa of ibn-Yusuf and its venerable mosques, has played its part in the Arabicization of the land.

"In its present form, the medersa dates from the dynasty of the Sa'adian sharifs, who succeeded the Merinids, and the short-lived dynasty of their cousins, the Beni Wattas of the 16th century. Like the tombs of the Sa'adian dynasty in the gasbah, or palace-quarter of Marrakesh, it is of very handsome and capable architecture. Old formulas are used, nothing new added, some decadence is evident, and yet, on the whole, the result is satisfying. Among other monuments to which the visitor has access is the fine 14th century fountain called Ishrub-wa-Shuf -- 'Drink and Look'.

"But interesting as is Marrakesh, an Orientalist must award first place to Fes, without even stopping to think. Though there is a French city some three kilometers distant, the medina has made few concessions to history. If one stays in the native city, he may, as I did, find lice in his hotel (though there is a luxury hotel, open only in winter), and he may also find it difficult to obtain accustomed food, but it would be the wildest folly for him to miss the chance to participate in the life of what is perhaps the last functioning High Islamic city -- to sit as a wedding-guest, listening to Andalusian music, to be invited to dine in tiled courtyards, to sip mint-tea with local sheikhs, to wander at will through the labyrinthine ways and side-lanes of this city, which is the jealous guardian of Andalusian civilization and Moorish culture. Although they live a closed and satisfied existence, the Fesis are a courteous and generous folk, who make an Arabic-speaking foreigner feel that he is accepted almost as an equal. Its tradition has made it exclusive, but its culture has made it gracious. It is a city of 'Ulema and merchant-bourgeois. Its university is the oldest in the world -- older, as I was sharply reminded, than Al-Azhar, and hence, presumably wiser."

"The delights of Fes are perhaps for the few, but they are real and precious. They will not last many more years, for the young people talk of boulevards and highways through the medina, of apartment houses, and of social emancipation of every sort. Only a sentimental fool would deny them their right to any or all of the benefits of modern civilization; but I, for one, am grateful to have seen Fes before the end.